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ABSTRACT

The study of literature in the secondary schools should not be based merely on affective and aesthetic grounds, but on cognitive and linguistic grounds as well. The facilitation of linguistic and cognitive growth can occur only in an environment that allows adolescents to experience literature on their own terms. The carefully structured, teacher-centered curricula that are most often used for high school developmental reading and traditional literature instruction are not in accord with sociolinguistic concepts of cognitive growth. Since English teachers are responsible for directing and enhancing their students' linguistic development, they should provide students with opportunities to explore and engage literature within personal limits and possibilities, which means adopting process-oriented, transactional, and dialogic emphases/methods in secondary school literature programs. (RL)

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Literature Study and Language Learning: A Sociolinguistic Approach to High School Literature Study

Paper presented at the combined Annual Meeting of the Secondary School English Conference and the Conference on English Education (Omaha, NE, March 27-29, 1980)

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The main thrust of my discussion concerns a pedagogic theory for secondary school literature in general. Current literary and aesthetic theories of literature study, which form the basis of university courses and provide the bulk of theoretical training for secondary school English teachers, are inadequate as pedagogy when applied to the secondary classroom. These theories do not provide for the non-college-bound-students, nor do these theories have any relation to any current theory of learning. What I would propose is a pedagogic theory for secondary school literature study based on a language-learning and cognitive development model, rather than a "cultural heritage," abstract "aesthetic," or mental discipline model.

Any comprehensive theory for literature study, one which takes into consideration all students rather than just the college-bound, must be tied to the cognitive growth of the adolescent based on language acquisition and development. As early as the Dartmouth conference of 1966, recommendations were made for the development of English education theories based on psycholinguistic, sociolinguistic, and child development models. No theory for literature study based on these models has appeared; secondary school literature study still lacks a meaningful comprehensive pedagogic theory.

Though this perception of the inadequacy of the college model is not new, and alternatives have been proposed (most notably Louise Rosenblatt's transactional model), no cognitive-developmental models of literature instruction have been suggested before or since Dartmouth.

Those theories which have appeared generally center on "appreciation" or "affective development" or other propositions as abstract and indefinite as the aesthetic and literary theories which dominate the universities. My point here is not to denigrate the "affective" domain as one of the key concerns of literary study, but the "affective" justification of literary study is increasingly being questioned by the basic skills and competency movements and is becoming a less and less defensible position. I wish to suggest the cognitive worth of literary study which will, in turn, reinforce the position of those concerned with the "affective" domain.

The theoretical position presented here is a sociolinguistic reconceptualization of Louise Rosenblatt's transactional theory of literary reading. The notion of process-oriented, interactive reading will be shown to be a necessary element in the language and verbal thought development of adolescents.

The basic linguistic concepts for the following theory come from Lev Vygotsky and illustrate the importance of sociolinguistic concerns in secondary English teaching. According to Vygotsky, in his book Thought and Language, the development of inner speech and verbal thought changes, in late childhood or early adolescence, from biological to sociohistorical:

> Verbal thought is not an innate form of behavior but is determined by a historical-cultural process and has specific properties and laws that cannot be found in the natural forms of speech and thought . . . The problem of thought and language thus extends beyond the limits of natural science and becomes the focal problem of historical human psychology, i.e., of social psychology. (51)

The inner speech function, the meeting place of thought and words, is the main consideration in a theory for a language-based literature curriculum and pedagogy. The formation of the structure of inner speech has an effect on the verbal thought and the communicative ability of adolescents. Inner speech, according to Moffett, "serves to process information as a guide to action," while "external speech serves to communicate." (TUD, 65) Inner speech is an internal dialogue, "a kind of unvoiced conversation with oneself." One of James Britton's colleagues, Harold Rosen, emphasizes the importance of the inner speech dialogic structure in Language, the Learner, and the School:

> It is through the enormous variety of dialogue with others that we gather together the linguistic resources to dialogue in our heads; there is nowhere else to get them from. Restrict the nature and quality of that dialogue and ultimately you restrict thinking. (126)

While dialogue is necessary for linguistic growth in the primary mode, speech, it seems reasonable that a dialogical construction would also be essential in the secondary activity of reading. This perception lends itself readily to Rosenblatt's conception of literary reading as an interactive, or dialogic process.

The act of reading, or as Britton terms it, "the special form of dialogue that is carried on between writer and readers of a work of fiction," plays an important part in linguistic development. The most important aspect of reading needed to maximize linguistic growth is the dialogical structure of the reading experience. Certainly, Rosenblatt's transactional theory of literature study is the best description of the process. Rosenblatt herself never claimed the psychological justification for her work, preferring instead to focus on the philosophical and

and aesthetic worth of the literary experience. As described in Literature as Exploration, Rosenblatt's theory subscribed to a vague form of mental discipline psychology which emphasized the "humanizing" or "liberalizing" nature of the literary experience. What she really needed to describe was the linguistic experience of the reader in order to build a psychological justification. But her description of the literary experience also provides the best description of the linguistic experience. Her transactional experience, reconceptualized as dialogue, and based on a specific concept of linguistic, and therefore, cognitive growth is a viable sociolinguistic base for literature study in the high school.

The dialogical structure of the reading experience, the transaction between the reader and the text, is irreplacable as a contributing factor in the development of inner speech and verbal thought, because, as Moffat tells us, "Outer and inner speech reciprocally determine each other . . ." (TUD, 65) Non-dialogic reading experiences might be said to either restrict or prohibit linguistic growth by the inhibiting of the dialogic structure of inner speech. In terms of the classroom, what this means is that the type of reading best suited to language development in general is that which presents the optimum opportunity for dialogue between the student and the text. Primarily, this means self-selected materials whose language and content are within some facet of the student's experience. It also means that the reading experience is unfettered from adult expectations and demands. The student's relationship to the text should not be one in which the text takes precedence; the text itself cannot transmit a "humanizing" influence without the cooperation of the reader.

The student and the text are in a reciprocal relationship to one another, a model of the relationship between the inner speech of the students and their verbal thought.

Much of the literary study in secondary schools is non-dialogic in nature. The student is asked to "get" the meaning of the text; to figure out "what the author is trying to say." A model of reading which asks the student to recapitulate what the author of the text has said, rather than interpret and evaluate the text within their own experience is a non-dialogic model and, as such, contributes little to the linguistic development of the student. Reading which is structured beforehand by preconceived notions as to the "meaning" of the text is a non-dialogic form of reading; it assumes a single experience as the best "reading." This sort of reading submerges individual response and interaction for a common product which is generally referred to as "culture" or "good taste." Such a monological approach to reading minimizes linguistic growth on the individual level for maximum control of the group response. The reproduction of cultural values takes precedence over the linguistic development of the students.

The other model of reading in the high school which is basically non-dialogic is that advanced by the developmental reading teacher. Much of literature study in modern secondary schools, especially the junior high school and the lower tracks in the high schools, has been or is being replaced by developmental reading. Not only is the developmental reading model non-dialogical with its primary emphasis on "comprehension," or literal reproduction of the text, but it further inhibits linguistic development of students by providing texts which do not contain "real language," but carefully codified and regularized imitations of language.

Not only are the students not encouraged to interact with the text, but if they were the language of the text would inhibit linguistic growth in and of itself. Again, the emphasis seems to be more on control of development, rather than linguistic development itself.

Of course, the transactional conception of literary reading, the dialogic model, lacks any notion of control in the reading activity. The teacher's influence comes in the spoken dialogue among the members of the class in an attempt to reach a consensus meaning. The spoken dialogue would also enhance, by its very nature, language development.

In conclusion, I would like to stress the necessity of literature study in the secondary schools not merely on affective and aesthetic grounds, but on cognitive and linguistic grounds as well. Maximization of linguistic, and therefore, cognitive growth can occur only in an environment which allows adolescents to experience literature on their own terms. The carefully structured, teacher-centered curricula provided by developmental reading and traditional literature instruction are not in accordance with sociolinguistic concepts of cognitive growth. If we are teachers of the English language, then our efforts should be directed at enhancing the linguistic development of our students; allowing them the opportunity to explore and engage literature within their own limits and possibilities is one of the best ways to make our contribution.

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